THE GIFT
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Luke 2:1–7

"And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth,
and laid him in a manger, because there was NO PLACE FOR THEM IN THE INN."
LUKE 2:7 (nrsv)

Startle us, once again, O God, with your truth and your love and your presence in our lives.
In the midst of the busy last minute preparations of the next few days,
give us moments of quietness and calm and peace to hear the story again:
angels singing and shepherds running to Bethlehem;
cattle lowing, wise men traveling, and a baby—
your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, child of Mary and Joseph, in a manager.
Startle us, O God. Amen.

Have you noticed that the older you become the more pleasure you derive from giving gifts at Christmas? There is, I conclude, a continuum deep in the soul of each one of us. At one end is the experience of receiving, getting. At the other end is the experience of giving. When we come into this world it's all about receiving. We have very real needs, and we're in a lot of trouble if there is not someone around totally focused on meeting our needs, giving us what we need. The secret is to move along the continuum and to become a giver, and if you were blessed, as I have been, there were people along the way who nudged you on, who taught you how to give.

Every December in elementary school, part of the weekly rhythm was to take time out from class to work on the Christmas gifts we were making to take home on the last day of school before vacation. How very wise it was. How very patient those dear teachers were. The gifts themselves didn't amount to much. I received a fair number myself over the years: the imprint of a child's hand pressed into wet plaster of paris and painted light blue was popular for a while, a Popsicle-stick pencil holder held together with glue and a red ribbon stood on my desk for years; hot pads, pot holders, and those wonderful tree ornaments with a picture of a beautiful first grader affixed —smiling out at you from among the pine branches with a great gap where front teeth used to be. It was all so important and wise.

My personal favorite was a Yule log candle holder. I must have been in fifth or sixth grade. Miss Moore had a picture of what it was supposed to look like, probably from one of those Christmas ideas magazines back before Martha Stewart complicated the whole business. Nothing we produced quite measured up to that picture. The school janitor took the boys to the basement, where he proceeded to saw the trunk of pine trees—whose branches had already been cut for classroom decoration—into one-foot lengths. We were each given one and patiently taught how to bore three holes in the log with a brace and bit, a real adventure. (The girls, I recall, were left behind in the classroom, working on the pot holders.) The idea was to drill three holes, put three red candles in the holes, tie a green ribbon around it—a real Yule log. The problem was that many of the logs, mine included, refused to remain upright when the candles were inserted and instead listed to one side or the other. And I remember the janitor, Beverly Gardner was his name, making small wedges of pine to put in place beneath the log to make it stable. “Fellas, maybe you shouldn’t light the candles,” he said.

We took those gifts home and presented them to our parents, our hearts bursting with pride and excitement and love. We were moving, taking small steps along that continuum, learning to give. How wise it was.

A treasured memory in our home is the day a six-year-old was taken Christmas shopping, came home with his gifts, helped wrap and hide them, and then was told carefully that it was a secret, that he shouldn’t tell anyone what he had purchased and wrapped and hidden. Well, it was all a little too much. I was trying to read the paper, I recall. He came to me and said, “Daddy, I bought you a present but I can’t tell.” “That’s nice,” I think I said. A few minutes later he was back again. “I bought you a nice present, but it’s a surprise. I can’t tell.” “Oh,” I must have said and returned to the paper. It happened a few more times. The pressure was building. Finally he said, “Please, Daddy, don’t look under my bed and find the socks I bought for you.”

How wise and good it is to learn to give. And how very important—essential actually—to our wholeness as human beings, our health, and, at the end of the day, our deepest joy. Learning how to give and love turns out to be fundamental to our humanity. It’s not an exaggeration to say that more than anything else in the world we need to learn how to love and give.

The great Russian novelist Dostoyevsky said, “I am convinced that the only hell there is, is the inability to love.”

Douglas John Hall, distinguished theologian, says that “Human Being” does not exist in the abstract. A self-made, autonomous, human being is a contradiction in terms. We are human only in relationship: “We are created

for relationship. . . . ‘Love’ is the essence of our humanity as the creator intends” (*Imagining God*, p. 119). Or, as St. Paul succinctly put it, “Without love I am nothing.”

Most of us have experienced the mysterious, life-sustaining, life-giving power of love. We know how the touch of a loving hand makes pain, emotional and physical, more bearable. About the only thing doctors can think of to do for newborn babies addicted to cocaine is to hold them tightly and rock them and love them.

Dr. Bernie Siegel, who writes so eloquently about his practice with critically ill patients, thinks that the reason Mother Teresa never contracted tuberculosis from the homeless poor she touched every day of her life was the power of her own love. “I am convinced,” he said, “that unconditional love is the most powerful known stimulant to the immune system.”

And the late Karl Menninger said that a good way to determine how mentally healthy you are is how much money you give away.

Learning to give and to love is the most critical life lesson of all—and the most precious gift. It is given to us by the love of others. The ability to give is given to us by the ones who loved us and who love us now. The unconditional love of parents, or a parent figure, is a resource that lasts a lifetime. And to be denied that, to never know it, worse yet to be neglected, rejected, or abused, is to live with the tragic burden of an anger and resentment that can last a lifetime or with the relentless effort to earn that love and acceptance and affirmation that was not there.

Langdon Gilkey, professor of theology at the University of Chicago, wrote, “To be enabled to love is the greatest gift that can be given to us, even more enhancing of the strengths of the self, of the depth of its joys, and thus of its reality and uniqueness, than being loved” (*Message and Existence*).

And so we come again to Christmas and the story of a man and a woman living in the town of Nazareth, traveling south to the Judean city of Bethlehem, just outside Jerusalem, because the Roman emperor, Augustus Caesar, has ordered a census to be taken. The woman is pregnant. While they are in Bethlehem, the woman gives birth to the baby. And because the inn is already full, they stay the night in the stable out back, in the midst of cows and sheep and donkeys, and they use the manger, the cow’s feed box, for the child’s cradle.

Think of the impact on human history that simple story has had. Think of the love generated by that simple story. Think of the giving it has inspired. The reason is that for untold millions of people down through history the account is more than a beautifully human story, although it is certainly that.

And if it inspired people to be more kind and generous and compassionate to one another, it would be enough. But it is more than that. It is a story about God: a story full of truth about the most fundamental reality there is. Embedded in the story is a breathtaking assertion: This is what God is like; the gift of this new life is God's gift to us.

Some of us got up early on Friday morning all fall and came to church and read through a very strenuous book together, *The History of God* by Karen Armstrong. We read about how the idea of God has always been a discussion between those who think God is transcendent and mysterious, remote and inaccessible—the God who exists beyond our ability to understand, the God who is essentially above all the messy ambiguity of our humanity—and those who think God is immanent, close, accessible, a participant in human history. We read about how the god of the philosophers had no emotions and feelings. God, Aristotle said, could not be touched, affected, moved. The "Unmoved Mover" the philosophers called God. And we read how at our best, the people of the Judeo-Christian family have affirmed the truth of both of those ideas: God holy and transcendent, God above human understanding and human history—and God immanent, close, accessible, involved. God who loves and gives, who comes in human birth and lives in the life of a man who gives all, gives his life itself.

God, this faith of ours suggests, is the one who loves this world, loves us. God, this faith of ours suggests, judges the world—but in love whose purpose is not to punish and condemn but to heal and redeem and forgive, to give itself away for the sake of the world.

The story of Christmas is the story of God's love. And the invitation is to receive the gift that has been given, to receive again the gift of God's love in your heart, to welcome the newborn Christ again as the startling, surprising, winsome love of God for you—and then to let it transform you, to live in and through you as you love and give.

One of my teachers, the late Reuel Howe, an Episcopal theologian and psychologist, used to say, "We do not find love by looking for it; we find it by giving it. And when we find love by loving, we find God. . . . If someone came to me and asked, 'How can we find God?' I would answer, 'Go find someone to love and you will find God'" (*Herein Is Love*, p. 45).

It's why we are here; it's why there are churches: to live out the mysterious power of love, God's love in Jesus Christ and the human love it inspires and releases into the world. It is why we are here: to remind everyone, particularly those who for whatever reason don't know it, that they are loved unconditionally, to introduce everyone— rich or poor, stable or instable, comfortable or marginal, accepted and well-connected or rejected and excluded—to introduce everyone to the gift of God's love.

It is the joy of my life to be part of a community of faith that understands that and lives out its faith in the city generously and compassionately, a church that strives to be a gift, an expression of God's love. It happens in so many ways, in all the mission outreach programs that touch the lives of children, families, older adults, the anxious and afraid, the homeless poor and hungry, seven days a week, all day long, the gift of God's love given over and over again. And it happens in a thousand small, mostly invisible ways as you give the gift of love to those who need you.

I received a letter recently postmarked Iowa City. The writing was very poor, and I did not recognize the name on the return address. It was addressed simply: "Pastor, Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago." Now usually letters like that are asking for money. Someone told the writer about a big church in Chicago that might send money. I confess, and I'm not proud of it, that I usually don't pay a lot of attention to those letters, but for some reason I did with this one.

> Dear Pastor,
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> I can't write very good. I am old lady. I live in Chicago for many years. Now I live in small place in Iowa. I am very sad in here. I don't care no more if I am live or dead. I am very poor and can't be in city. I don't write to you to ask for any money. Please pray for me. I am very lonely.

It was signed simply, "Maria."

So I presumed a bit and did what I thought you would want me to do. I wrote to Maria and asked how she was doing. And I told her about Christmas at Fourth Presbyterian Church and how things are looking in the city. I put in a little bit about the Bull's new coach and the Cubs new first baseman and Mayor Daley and the new lights on the church. And I took it upon myself to sign for you. I signed, "Your friends at Fourth Presbyterian Church."

It is why we are here. It is who God calls us to be.

The greatest gift of all is the ability to love and to give.

It is why the baby was born in Bethlehem of Judea so many years ago. It is why the shepherds ran and angels sang.

Thanks be to God.